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ABSTRACT

Noting that play varies as a function of culture, gender, setting, and parent or teacher valuing, a study examined the play of children in Singapore. Subjects were 56 middle- and working-class preschoolers between the ages of 46 and 72 months who were videotaped at play in their homes and in the child care centers that they attended and rated on the Parten/Piaget and Smilansky play scales. The children's mothers completed a 20-item questionnaire on their attitude towards play and were assessed as to socioeconomic status by the Hollingshead 4-factor index. It was found that parallel play and functional play occurred more at home, whereas associative and cooperative play occurred more in the child care centers. Girls' play scores were higher than boys on the Smilansky but not the Parten/Piaget play scales. The lack of socioeconomic status differences and the relative mildness of sex differences reflects a strong movement toward modernity in Singapore families. (MDM)

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SINGAPORE PRESCHOOLERS' PLAY IN RELATION TO SOCIAL CLASS, SEX, AND SETTING

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Running head: Singapore play

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Abstract

Play varies as a function of culture, child sex, setting, and parent/teacher valuing. Middle and working-class (by Hollingshead) Singapore preschoolers' (N = 56, M = 59 months) play was videotaped at home and in centers. Smilansky and Parten/Piaget play measures were coded from tapes. Parents across SES valued play and had high Caldwell HOME scores. Parallel play and functional play were higher at home, and associative/cooperative play higher in centers. Girls' play scores were higher on Smilansky but not Parten/Piaget play scales. Smilansky scores were higher at center than in-home play. Use of several settings may be important in order to establish frequency, maturity, and variety of preschooler play. Lack of SES differences and relative mildness of sex differences in the two play measures reflects strong movement toward modernity in Singapore families.

SINGAPORE PRESCHOOLERS' PLAY IN RELATION TO SOCIAL CLASS, SEX, AND SETTING

The Problem

Measures of play utilized for assessment in other cultures may not have the same correlates or significance for development as they have in the Western societies in which they have been developed. Additionally, play scores may vary as a function of differential sex role socialization across cultures, parental and preschool teacher valuing of play, and home versus preschool setting.

Research Design

In this study, which is part of a larger study of Singapore preschoolers, 28 boys and 28 girls (46 to 72 months, M = 59 months), from middle and working class Singapore families, were observed and videotaped at play both at home, and in the child care centers the children attended. During a 20-minute free play period in the centers, a standardized array of toys was provided for the children. Play props included a doctor's kit, a cash register, housekeeping furniture, grocery store and dress-up items. The teachers were requested to invite the children to engage in make-believe play. All of the children had attended the centers for at least nine months prior to the observations and were thoroughly adjusted to the setting.

Parent and SES Measures

The children spoke both Mandarin and English with their parents, although English was used predominantly. Parental attitudes toward play were determined through a 20-item questionnaire "Parental attitude toward play" (which permitted parental responses on a 4-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree) completed by the mother of each child. Socioeconomic status (SES) was assessed by the Hollingshead four- factor index (M=44.73 .

M=56.96 for the lower-middle vs. middle SES groups respectively).

Play Measures

Parten/Piaget. Data collection for the Parten/Piaget play categories (Rubin et al., 1976) was carried out during 15-second observation periods and 5-second coding periods monitored by a light/blip signal system. Intercoder reliability was 90.9% on a pilot sample of 20 5-minute samples.

Smilansky. Videotaped play was also coded according to Smilansky's sociodramatic play inventory (Smilansky & Sheftaya, 1990), for which the six subcategories are: imitative role play, symbolic substitutive use of objects, make-believe role play, persistence in role play, degree of social interaction during sociodramatic play, and verbal communication in the context of play.

Results and Discussion

Social Class

In these two-parent Singapore families, regardless of SES level, play and learning were highly valued and encouraged, as revealed by the parent questionnaires. Homes were abundantly provided with toys. A majority of the parents indicated positive attitudes toward play, a high frequency of parental involvement and participation in their children's play, and a high degree of agreement with the statement that "Children should be encouraged to engage in pretend/imaginative play". Thus it is not surprising that no SES differences were found in Parten/Piaget play subscores or total scores nor in Smilansky sociodramatic total scores or subscores. The two different measures of play were coded from the tapes (by SEL, who is fluent in both languages) in an effort to determine possible intercorrelational patterns between play measures and whether play scores would vary as a function of child sex, SES, and

home vs. center setting. Social class differences in quality of play so often reported among USA children were not found in this Singapore sample.

The greater homogeneity of Singapore culture across social class in comparison with Western families was further verified by analysis of Caldwell HOME scores for each family. The Caldwell HOME instrument (Caldwell & Bradley, 1984) is an observation-plus interview measure of the home environment as a support for children's early learning. No differences in total HOME scores were found ($\underline{M}$=45.8 and $\underline{M}$=47.8 respectively for the lower-middle and middle SES families). Indeed, in both SES groups, the total scores approached closely the highest possible Caldwell HOME score of 55. Middle SES families did score significantly higher than working class for the HOME subscore "provision of learning stimulation" ($\underline{M}$=10.39 vs. $\underline{M}$=9.43). But parental warmth, academic stimulation, modeling, provision of variety in experience, acceptance (rather than punishment) and language stimulation subscores did not differ for the two SES groups. In forward stepwise regressions, neither SES or HOME scores contributed significantly to the variance for either Smilansky or Parten/Piaget play measures at home or in center.

Play Measures and Sex Differences

Parten/Piaget play categories reflected some differences in frequency as a function of setting. Rates of solitary play, dramatic play, and onlooker behaviors during free play did not differ according to home or preschool setting. However, parallel play and functional play were significantly more likely to occur at home compared with center ($\underline{p}$<.001). Associative/cooperative play was twice as likely to occur in the center as at home. The variety of dramatic play toys available in the center, the presence of many familiar peers, and the invitations by preschool teachers for children to engage in role play probably account for these

differences. There were no significant sex differences in Parten/Piaget subscores or total scores between boys and girls.

There were, however, significant sex differences in total Smilansky scores (M=37.35 vs. M=31.03 respectively for females vs. males). Significant subscore differences in favor of girls vs. boys were found for "persistence in role play" (M=8.64 vs. M=6.92) and for "imitative role play" (M=8.71 vs. M=7.39). The higher scores for females may reflect girls' greater preference for dramatic play items and small manipulable toys available in preschool compared with preschool boys' preference for group games and outdoor equipment. These sex role differences are typical of those also reported for Western preschoolers.

Center versus Home: Play Scores

Smilansky total scores were higher for center play (M=42.61) compared with play in the home setting (M=34.19). Sociodramatic play was more frequent in center play than at home, despite the large supply of toys at home. Thus, even when children's play is supported through parental encouragement and toy purchase, center play experience under the tutelage of trained caregivers is associated with significantly more sociodramatic play,which has been found to predict later cognitive advances.

Smilansky center and Smilansky home scores were not significantly correlated (r=.18,n.s). Thus, the use of several settings may be important in order to establish the frequency, maturity, and variety of preschooler play. In-center Smilansky and Parten/Piaget play subscores intercorrelated substantially. Total Smilansky score correlated at $p<.001$ level with several Parten/Piaget categories - for example : $r=.70$ with dramatic play score, $r=-.57$ with functional play, and $r=.56$ with associative/cooperative play.

Conclusions

The play patterns of present day Singapore preschoolers reveal a far more egalitarian family mode of childrearing than is reflected in the history of Confucian preference for and attention to males in the culture in which the families were reared (Yi, 1993). That sex differences were found in one measure but not the other argues for the use of multiple measures in cross-cultural researches that involve assessment of children's play.

The lack of socioeconomic class differences and the relative mildness of sex differences in the two play measures reflects a strong movement toward modernity in Singapore families. These results suggest that childcare center experience provides preschoolers with enriched possibilities for sociodramatic play beyond those available even in homes well-provisioned with toys and well-disposed toward approval of and support for the importance of preschool play both for girls and boys.

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